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Michigan Radio

he Environment Report

8:55 am
Thu August 8, 2013

Fracking and the environment: what do scientists know so far?

By [Rebecca Williams](#)



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4:00

You can hear the interview with Abrahm Lustgarten two minutes into today's Environment Report.

As the national debate around horizontal hydraulic fracturing continues, one of the central questions is: what does the practice do to our environment?

Abrahm Lustgarten is an energy reporter with ProPublica. He's covered fracking extensively, and

he recently wrote a piece investigating the Environmental Protection Agency's decision to back away from several studies on fracking.

Here's an excerpt:

When the Environmental Protection Agency abruptly retreated on its multimillion-dollar investigation into water contamination in a central Wyoming natural gas field last month, it shocked environmentalists and energy industry supporters alike.

In 2011, the agency had issued a blockbuster draft report saying that the controversial practice of fracking was to blame for the pollution of an aquifer deep below the town of Pavillion, Wy. – the first time such a claim had been based on a scientific analysis.

The study drew heated criticism over its methodology and awaited a peer review that promised to settle the dispute. Now the EPA will instead hand the study over to the state of Wyoming, whose research will be funded by EnCana, the very drilling company whose wells may have caused the contamination.

On today's Environment Report, I asked Lustgarten: how much do we know about the environmental impact of fracking?

"We don't know as much as scientists say they'd like to know, and we know a lot more than we did four or five years ago when this issue first came on the national stage. There's basically very little monitoring of underground water quality across the United States to check for contaminants, whether that's from natural gas drilling or any other industrial process. Without monitoring and long-term monitoring, there's very little way to know for sure whether fracking chemicals are contaminating water or moving substantially underground," he says.

Lustgarten says there have been quite a few studies lately of the impacts of drilling chemicals and air quality emissions above ground.

"Those studies have found, for example, that there's a correlation between methane and drinking water wells close to places where drilling has happened. There's been several studies published by the Proceedings of the Natural Academy of Sciences to that effect. So this is part of an emerging view that there is a substantial threat. But I don't think with these sorts of scientific studies that you have a consensus until you have many of them and there still are not quite enough. So I think the scientific community is in a state of: concern, but wait and see. But we certainly know a lot more than we did four or five years ago and the signs point to cause for concern."

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